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# Encouraging Charitable Donations via Charity Gift Cards: A Self-Determination Theoretical Account

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#### ABSTRACT

Charities seeking to increase donations are now offering charity gift cards (CGCs), which allow recipients to select how their gift card is allocated across various charitable projects. Supporting a model derived from self-determination theory, an experiment shows that U.S. consumers are more satisfied and more likely to donate to the card-sponsoring charity after using a CGC than after learning a donation has been made in their name, because CGCs enhance consumers' felt autonomy, competence, and relationship with the charity and its projects, which predict a more charitable self-concept and satisfaction with the gift. Theoretical and managerial implications are discussed. **KEYWORDS** 

Charitable giving; charity gift cards; self-determination theory

The success of nonprofits and public-sector organizations rests heavily on the motivation of donors, volunteers, employees, and constituents to contribute to, engage with, and sustain these important organizations and their initiatives. Consequently, marketing scholars have devoted considerable effort to identifying factors that motivate—for example, donating and remaining loyal to charities (Kim & Kou, 2014; Mittelman & Rojas-Méndez, 2013; O'Reilly, Ayer, Pegoraro, Leonard, Rundle-Thiele (2012), volunteering (Taghian, D'Souza, & Polonsky, 2012), voting (Winchester, Binney, & Hall, 2014), learning in public-sector institutions (Bernard, Osmonbekou, & McKee, 2011), and revisiting public spaces, such as museums (Hume, 2011).

While prior research has advanced an understanding of nonprofit and public-sector involvement, a unifying theory to explain these phenomena is lacking. Toward that end, the present work aims to advance research in these domains by utilizing self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) to understand willingness to donate to charities via an innovative fundraising tool, the charity gift card. Building on the foundation of the traditional "gift in your name" approach, charity gift cards allow the recipient to choose

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where the money on their charity gift card is allocated (e.g., a well-water project in Peru). As an example, TisBest.org advertises over 250 charity options, while JustGive.org advertises 1,000 options (Izzo, 2008).

As an emerging option for charitable involvement and giving, charity gift cards (CGCs) have received mixed reviews. On the one hand, concerned over service fees and the length of time it can take to get donations to nonprofits, Consumer Reports suggested that donors avoid giving gift cards altogether and rather "consider giving directly to the charitable group or groups, perhaps in your gift recipients' name" (Consumer Reports, 2009). In contrast, philan-thropy professionals have encouraged consumers to consider the benefits of charity gift cards, such as introducing CGC recipients to new charitable organizations and offering the recipient choice over where the donation goes.

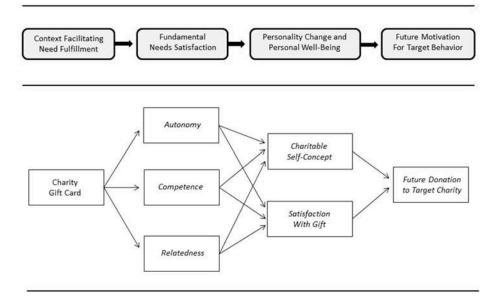
Given the infancy of the charity gift card, conflicting recommendations offered by practitioners, and opportunities for theoretical and practical contributions within charity research, the current paper explores how consumers respond when they receive a CGC. Specifically, we explore how receiving and using a charity gift card (versus a charitable gift in one's name) impacts consumers' charitable self-view, satisfaction with the gift, and future like-lihood of donating to charity sponsoring the charity gift card due to the CGC's ability to foster autonomy, competence, and relatedness, three key needs identified in self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). We also explore whether very high levels of choice may negatively impact consumer responses (Schwartz, 2004).

### **Theoretical development**

As just noted, some industry professionals have expressed concerns over fees and delays associated with CGCs. While these potential drawbacks are not inconsequential, in theory, CGCs appear to offer a number of advantages over the more traditional "charitable gift in your name" option. One theoretical perspective within which these advantages can clearly be seen is Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory (SDT).

#### Self-determination theory

Self-determination theory is a framework for understanding factors that facilitate both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, personality development, and personal well-being. SDT assumes that people are motivated by three fundamental needs, including the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which "appear to be essential for facilitating optimal functioning of the natural propensities for growth and integration, as well as for constructive social development and personal well-being" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68). When tasks and contexts facilitate the three fundamental needs, people experience



**Figure 1.** Self-determination theory of need fulfillment, personality change, and motivation applied to use of charity gift cards.

positive growth and well-being and subsequent motivation to engage in the target behavior, as shown in the top panel of Figure 1.

SDT stresses the benefits of intrinsically motivating tasks. According to Ryan and Deci (2000), intrinsic motivation is "the inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one's capacities, to explore, and to learn" (p. 70). In general, novel and interesting tasks that provide opportunities for autonomy, competence, and relatedness promote intrinsically motivated behavior, which contributes to a positive self-concept, well-being, and subsequent motivation to engage in the target behavior. As an example, seniors are more likely to engage in and enjoy community activities when needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met (Webster, 2008).

#### SDT and charity gift cards

In theory, SDT is relevant to the use of CGCs. Recall that, in contrast to the common "gift in your name," CGCs allow the gift card recipient to decide how the money on their gift card is allocated, among a range of charitable projects. This means the gift card recipient has choice over which project to move forward and an increased opportunity to choose projects that match his or her values. Viewed in the context of SDT, these features of the CGC would seem to offer recipients greater *autonomy* (or control) over how their gift card is used, an increased sense of *competence*  (e.g., or impact on charity beneficiaries), and a stronger *relationship* (or connection) with those helped by the charity's projects. Meeting these needs, in turn, is likely to lead to a more charitable self-concept, heightened satisfaction with the CGC experience, and future donations to the charity in question, as shown in the bottom panel of Figure 1.

# Preliminary support for an SDT approach to using CGCs

Consistent with the present model's emphasis on autonomy (or control), research finds that consumers are more satisfied when given the opportunity to choose among (attractive) alternatives (Botti & Iyengar, 2004) and when given expanded choice options (Koelemeijer & Oppewal, 2000; Oppewal & Koelemeijer, 2005), in part because greater choice offers variety and increases the likelihood that consumers will find a preferred option (Van Herpen & Pieters, 2002) and in part because having choice increases the sense of personal causality (Botti & McGill, 2011). Indeed, in one recent survey, 46.4% of respondents said they give gift cards because gift cards enable the recipient to select their own gift (National Retail Federation, 2011).

Charity/helping research also supports the importance of meeting the donor's needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. For example, several studies have found that prosocial/donating behavior is more likely when need for autonomy (Ferguson, Gutberg, Schattke, Paulin, & Jost, 2015; Gagné, 2003; Roth, 2008) and relatedness (Pavey, Greitemeyer, & Sparks, 2011) have been met (cf. Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2008). On a related note, research has found that a sense of connection with the beneficiary is critical for donation intentions and that marketers can increase a sense of connection through perceived similarity, identifiability, or tangibility (e.g., showing one recipient instead of many; the identifiable victim effect; Cryder & Lowenstein, 2010); empathy with the cause (Paulin, Ferguson, Schattke, Jost, 2014); and personal experience (e.g., donating to people with a related misfortune) (Bennett, 2012; Small, 2011). Supporting the importance of self-determination theory's competence need, research shows that one of the strongest motives for engaging in online social lending for development (e.g., via kiva.org) is a desire to make a difference in the beneficiary's life (Mittelman & Rojas-Méndez, 2013), and people are more likely to engage in a charity sports event when they believe they can make a difference (Filo, Groza, & Fairley, 2012). Finally, research shows that prosocial behavior that is autonomously motivated leads to higher subjective well-being and self-esteem (Weinstein & Ryan, 2010).

### Choice overload: The potential downside of choice

Although we theorize that the choice afforded by a charity gift card will have benefits (e.g., heightened satisfaction and future donations), research also suggests that too much choice may generate negative consequences (Scheibehenne, Greifeneder, & Todd, 2010). Schwartz (2004), for example, suggests that too many options are overwhelming and can cause people to be less satisfied with their final choice, while other research finds that when people must choose from among many appealing options, they experience a decrease in their motivation to even make a choice (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000). This suggests that if charity gift card recipients are offered too many charity options, they may become less satisfied and less inclined to donate in the future.

#### Study goals and hypotheses

Drawing on the reasoning just offered, in the present study, we explore the benefits and potential drawbacks associated with choice in the context of CGCs. While CGCs have been growing in popularity, we were unable to find any research exploring consumer responses to charity gift cards. To address this gap, we tested the hypotheses that, relative to a gift in the recipient's name, CGCs enhance satisfaction of consumers' fundamental needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which in turn are positively associated with a more charitable self-concept and satisfaction with the gift, which in turn are positively associated with a greater likelihood of donating to the charity sponsoring the CGC (bottom of Figure 1). Drawing on the choice overload literature, we also explored the possibility that offering CGC recipients with too many options (12 versus 6 projects) may lead to lower levels of all model variables (need satisfaction, charitable self-concept, gift satisfaction, and future donations to the target charity). While the choice overload literature suggests that additional choice may be overwhelming, it is unknown where overload may occur and whether 12 choices will lead to a positive or a negative experience for recipients. Indeed, we found only one study in the charitable donations literature that tested the choice overload hypothesis, and it found no significant difference between charity choice sets of 2, 5, 30, or 40 options (Scheibehenne, Greifeneder, & Todd, 2009). Thus, while we anticipate the possibility of choice overload, we treat this as a mostly exploratory question.

#### Method

#### **Participants**

Given that nonprofits work with a wide range of ages, we sought to replicate this with participants for the study. Further, to remove a potential impact of gender, a balanced sample of men and women was sought. Thus, participants were recruited from an online panel of U. S. consumers (N = 117, age range 19–78 years, mean age 51 years, 51.3% female, 80% Caucasian) using a respected online panel provider (Qualtrics.com). Participants completed the study in exchange for compensation and were randomly assigned to conditions.

#### Gift in your name versus charity gift card manipulation

Participants first read a scenario in which they were asked to imagine it was Christmas, and they were gathered around the Christmas tree for their annual extended family gift exchange (only participants who indicated that they exchanged gifts at Christmas were run in the study). Specifically, participants read that their Aunt Robin handed them a gift envelope. Depending on the condition, the scenario indicated that the envelope contained either a gift-in-your-name certificate or a charity gift card for a hypothetical charity called Pile on:charity. In both conditions, the gift was worth \$50. In the gift-in-your-name (no choice) condition, participants were told that their Aunt Robin had made a gift in their name to the charity. In the charity gift card (choice) condition, participants could choose one global charity project from among six project choices in one scenario or twelve project choices in another scenario. In sum, the study used three conditions: gift in participant's name, charity gift card (six global project options) and charity gift card (twelve global project options). We selected six and twelve options after observing that a number of similar charities offer potential donors a choice between three to six options. This suggested that six was not an unreasonable number on the low end and that twelve options would be seen as relatively high in comparison with the norm.

To simulate a charity gift card experience, participants were shown digital copies of a gift certificate (first condition) or a charity gift card (last two conditions), as shown in Appendix A. After reading the scenario, participants in the charity gift card condition were shown several screenshots of potential projects and were asked to choose which of six (or twelve) global charity projects they would choose to use their charity gift card on before proceeding to the dependent measures. In the gift-in-your-name condition, no project choice option was necessary and participants simply proceeded to the dependent measures.

#### **Dependent measures**

Next, participants rated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed  $(1 = strongly \ disagree$  to  $7 = strongly \ agree$ ) that (a) they had control over where their donation went (related to autonomy); (b) their donation had an

impact on the types of projects and people the participant valued (related to competence) (r = .97, p < .001); (c) they felt connected to the charity, project, and people receiving their donation (related to relatedness) (alpha = .98). Participants also rated the extent to which they (a) were satisfied with their gift ( $1 = very \ dissatisfied$ ,  $7 = very \ satisfied$ ); (b) felt that the gift changed them and made them a more charitable person ( $1 = strongly \ disagree$ ,  $7 = strongly \ agree$ ) (r = .92, p < .001); and (c) would donate to the charity on the gift certificate (charity gift card) in the future ( $1 = very \ unlikely$ ,  $7 = very \ likely$ ). A full list of the items appears in Appendix B. Participants then completed a card comprehension check and provided demographics; only those who answered the comprehension check correctly (N = 117/162; 72.2%) were included in the analysis.

# Results

As an initial step in our analysis, we submitted the six dependent measures (perceived autonomy, competence, relatedness; charitable self-concept; satisfaction with gift; and future donations to target charity) to a one-way MANOVA with a three-level, between-participants gift condition factor (gift in participant's name, CGC-6 options, CGC-12 options). The MANOVA was deemed appropriate, in light of the correlated nature of the dependent variables (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010). The MANOVA revealed a significant effect of the gift condition on the set of six dependent variables: Wilks's lambda = .61, F(12, 216) = 4.97, p < .001. Subsequent one-way ANOVAs on each of the six dependent variables were significant (all p < .001), and trend analyses further revealed a significant linear trend (all p < .001) and a significant quadratic trend (all p < .001) on each of the six dependent variables.

As can be seen in Figure 2, the quadratic trend on each dependent variable was consistent with choice overload, with means jumping sharply from the gift in participant's name condition to the charity gift card six-options condition, and then dropping off in the charity gift card 12-options condition. The significant quadratic trends tentatively suggest that charities that offer gift cards may witness a drop-off in satisfaction and future donations if charities provide donors with too many options. At the same time, the reduction in satisfaction and future donations is not striking. Indeed, subsequent post hoc Tukey pairwise comparisons revealed that the two charity gift card conditions did not differ significantly on any of the dependent variables, though each differed significantly from the gift in participant's name condition (p < .05). Based on these results, evidence for the choice overload hypothesis in the present data is not overwhelming.

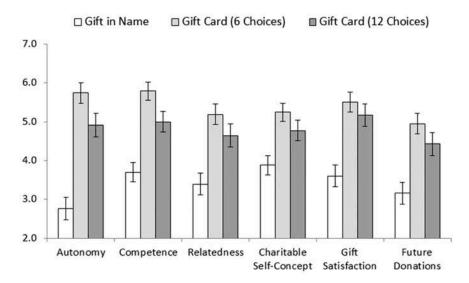


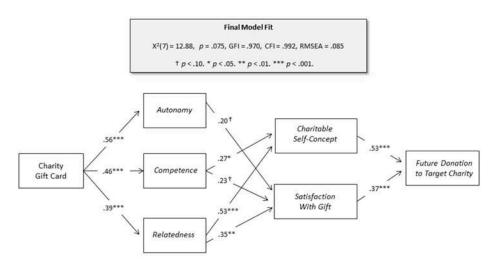
Figure 2. Model variables as a function of gift condition.

Next, we tested the proposed model (Figure 1, bottom panel). Because the Tukey tests indicated that the two charity gift card conditions did not differ significantly on any of the model variables, prior to testing the model, we combined the two charity gift card conditions into a single charity gift card condition (-1 = gift in your name, 1 = CGC conditions combined).

An initial path analysis testing the model revealed a reasonable fit to the data (satisfactory GFI and CFI, but a somewhat large RMSEA):  $\chi^2(6) = 12.88$ , p < .05, GFI = .970, CFI = .990, RMSEA = .100. Examination of individual paths indicated that autonomy had no effect on self-view ( $\beta = .00$ , p = 1.00). Thus, this path was dropped. As can be seen in Figure 3, the resulting model fit the data well: charity gift card condition had a significant positive impact on perceived autonomy, competence, and relatedness (all p < .001); perceived competence and relatedness were significantly and positively related to change in charitable self-view (p < .05 and p < .001, respectively); autonomy and competence showed marginally significant positive correlations with gift satisfaction (p < .01); finally, charitable self-concept and gift satisfaction were significant unique predictors of future donations to the target charity (both p < .001).

#### Discussion

An emerging option for consumers interested in charitable giving is the charity gift card. While the availability of charity gift cards is growing in the marketplace, little research has explored how consumers respond when they receive a charity gift card. The present work addressed that gap by



**Figure 3.** Final model linking charity gift card condition to future donations through need satisfaction, charitable self-concept, and gift satisfaction.

advancing and testing a model, derived from self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), predicting how consumers respond when they receive and use a charity gift card. Consistent with the proposed model, results showed that relative to a more traditional "gift in your name," the use of charity gift cards increases consumers' (a) perceived control over where their donation is allocated (meeting the need for autonomy), (b) perceived impact on the types of people and projects they value (meeting the need for competence), and (c) felt connection with the sponsoring charity and its projects (meeting need for relatedness). Satisfaction of these needs, in turn, was positively related to the consumer's charitable self-concept and satisfaction with the gift, which in turn were both positive (and unique) predictors of future donation intentions to the target charity. Results did not, however, provide strong support for the possibility of choice overload (Scheibehenne et al., 2010; Schwartz, 2004) when comparing consumers who were allowed to choose between six charities to those allowed to choose between 12 charities. Taken together, these findings have important theoretical implications for work on helping and charitable giving and have practical implications for charities considering the implementation of a charity gift card program.

#### Theoretical and managerial implications

The main theoretical lens underlying the present study is Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory. To date, self-determination theory has been applied to a variety of consumer decisions, including social, nonprofit, and public-sector marketing. For example, Moller, Ryan, and Deci (2006) suggested SDT could be used to improve the quality of decisions concerning

health and environmental behavior, while Michaelidou and Moraes (2014) recently highlighted the role of SDT in predicting physical exercise behavior. Other research has applied SDT to understand customer loyalty (Dholakia, 2006; Lin, Tsai, & Chiu, 2009; O'Donnell & Brown, 2012) and consumer life satisfaction among impoverished consumers (Martin & Hill, 2012). As reviewed in our introduction, a number of studies have also used SDT to understand consumers' decision to engage in prosocial behavior and donate to or engage with various causes. Despite this progress, no studies have used SDT to understand how consumers respond to charity gift cards. We built on this emerging literature by testing a theory suggesting that charity gift cards promote growth in the self and future donations by meeting the three fundamental needs identified in SDT. This work extends past research and opens up new opportunities for research within innovative forms of consumer-charity exchange.

Complementing this work's theoretical implications are its managerial implications. Put succinctly, for managers and marketers interested in encouraging charitable contributions, the present work is good news, in that charity gift cards increase the likelihood of future giving by facilitating the fulfillment of fundamental needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Beyond their ability to meet these needs, charity gift cards circumvent one of the challenges charities often face, which is the tendency for donors to become irritated when they are the target of a large number of direct mailings from the charity (van Diepen, Donkers, & Franses, 2009). Compared with the relatively "cold" lead generated from such mass mailings, charity gift cards represent more of a "warm" lead desired by charities and marketers-for example, it seems reasonable to assume that the charity gift card recipient has a close relationship with the gift giver and that the two may share important values (e.g., political orientation); after all, it seems unlikely that one would give another a charity gift card if one did not know the recipient fairly well. The overlap between the charity gift card giver and receiver, in turn, may enhance the effectiveness of the charity gift card experience-for example, by framing charitable giving in more personal terms and increasing the likelihood that the charity gift card recipient will find a charity that matches his or her ideological orientation (cf. Winterich, Zhang, & Mittal, 2012).

With that said, the present results tentatively suggest two caveats. First, the increased choice afforded by charity gift cards may come with a cost that requires further exploration and careful monitoring. While charities may think it beneficial to offer very large choice sets, the present research finds that the positive consequences of charity gift cards began to taper off when consumers faced as few as 12 choices. Although this reduction was not significant (versus 6 choices), it deserves further attention. At a minimum, managers hoping to offer more substantial choice sets may consider some

recent research in this area suggesting that consumers may benefit from categorization (Scheibehenne et al., 2010), whereby they categorize projects (e.g., water, education, environment) first, then choose from a reduced choice set of actual projects within their category of interest. Second, if charities cannot deliver what they promise (e.g., getting the money to a certain project, village, or person), consumers may turn on the very charities they once supported (i.e., love-becomes-hate effect; Grégoire, Tripp, & Legoux, 2009).

The present results may also carry managerial implications beyond charitable fundraising. For example, it is possible that self-determination theory can provide a useful lens for understanding how to motivate involvement in a wider array of nonprofit and public-sector domains, including volunteering (Taghian et al., 2012), voting (Winchester et al., 2014)), community building (Gilpin & Miller, 2013; Waters & Jones, 2011; Anderson et al., 2013), student engagement and retention (Angulo-Ruiz & Pergelova, 2013; Casidy, 2014), and even winning back lapsed donors (Feng, 2014). It would also be interesting to determine whether nonprofit and public-sector advertising is more effective when ads emphasize the ability to meet needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Indeed, in one recent nonprofit advertising study using eye-tracking technology, ad recipients were more likely to recommend that others donate to a nonprofit when the ad recipient spent more time looking at the face in the ad (Bebko, Sciulli, & Bhagat, 2014). This suggests that ads with faces may enhance a sense of relatedness, connection, and/or empathy with those in need, which in turn predisposes people to donate to or become involved in a cause.

# Limitations and future directions

Before concluding, we consider three limitations of the present studies and suggest several directions for future research. First, the present study was based on a cross-sectional design using a scenario methodology. While consistent with much of the services research (e.g., Bateson & Hui, 1992; Smith & Bolton, 1998), future research could explore these decisions within a real-world context and determine whether the self-determination theoretical perspective generalizes to a broader range of nonprofit and public-sector domains. Second, our research did not provide evidence for the choice overload hypothesis, but at most, consumers were faced with a choice between 12 charitable projects. Thus, future research should explore the charity choice overload hypothesis by expanding the choice sets beyond 12. Third, it is important to recognize that, by their very nature, the charity gift card and gift-in-your-name options had several differences beyond the choice-versus-no-choice dimension. Specifically, whereas those in the charity gift card condition saw images of six (or 12) charity options, those in the

control condition were not shown a similar set of pictures. Future research might incorporate pictures into the gift-in-your-name condition to more closely parallel the charity gift card condition stimuli. Finally, our research leaves open questions about additional mediating mechanisms that may account for our findings. For example, emotions play an important role in prosocial decision making (Lindenmeier, 2014). As such, future research might delve into the role of emotions such as empathy (Kim & Kou, 2014) as mediators in our model of when and why consumers respond positively to charity gift cards.

Beyond the issues just raised, it would be interesting to explore consumers' motivations for *giving* charity gift cards, how the giving and receiving of charity gift cards impacts relationships between the gift giver and receiver, and whether the use of charity gift cards may lead to more-profound changes within the gift card recipient, for example, whether utilizing a charity gift card motivates a more sustained pattern of charitable giving and engagement. Future research on these and related questions could meaningfully advance our understanding of nonprofit and public-sector support and involvement.

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#### Notes

1. The stem for the items constituting autonomy, competence, and relatedness read: "Thinking about the charity that your donation supported, to what extent would you feel ...?" Participants responded to these six items on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree).

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#### Appendix A

Gift-in-Your-Name and Charity Gift Card Stimuli Gift-in-Your-Name Certificate

#### **Charity Gift Card Stimuli**

Charity Gift Card—After being shown this card, participants in the CGC conditions were directed to a website that allowed them to choose among either six possible charities or twelve possible charities, as shown below.

Six-Choice Condition

Twelve-Choice Condition

#### **Appendix B**

#### **Dependent Measures**

#### Autonomy<sup>1</sup>

Thinking about the charity that your donation supported, to what extent would you feel

•••

you have control over where your donation goes?

**Competence** (r = .97, *p* < .001)

your donation has an impact on the type of projects you like to support?

your donation has an impact on the type of people you like to support?

**Relatedness** ( $\alpha = .98$ )

connected to the charity receiving your donation?

connected to the project receiving your donation?

connected to the people receiving your donation?

**Charitable Self-Concept** (r = .92, p < .001)

I think this charity experience changed me (in some way) for the better (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree)

I view myself as a more charitable person because of this charity experience (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree)

#### Satisfaction With Gift

To what extent would you feel satisfied with your aunt's gift?  $(1 = very \ dissatisfied \ to 7 = very \ satisfied)$ .

#### **Future Donation Intention**

How likely would you be to donate money to Pile\_on:charity in the future? (1 = very unlikely to 7 = very likely).







